



CROSS, QIBLAH AND GLORY WHAT SHOULD DIRECT CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO ISLAM?

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CROSS, *QIBLAH* AND GLORY : WHAT SHOULD DIRECT CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO ISLAM?

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INTRODUCTION

See the ignorance of the Christian appealing for protection to the Lord who was suspended (on a cross). (Muslim)¹

When we want to talk about our faith to other people sometimes they just push this weak button by saying: you follow a God that has died already. (Muslim background Christian)²

Compared to all other world views, it is above all the Cross that makes Christianity distinctive. It continues to be the foolishness and the stumbling block that it ever was, because it simply does not fit into any scheme other than that of the biblical salvation story. Theological reflection in the context of any other system is likely to take us again and again to the Cross at the heart of our faith. (Christian)³

At the heart of much Muslim response to Christianity is a denial of the Cross⁴: this paper suggests that what should be at the heart of Christian responses to Islam is affirmation of the Cross,

1 Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Mathnawi*, III:2581, quoted by L. Ridgeon, "Christianity as portrayed by Jalal al-Din Rumi," in L. Ridgeon (ed), *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity* (London: Curzon, 2001), 111.

2 Muslim Background Believer,

3 I. Glaser, "Cross-Reference Theology: Speaking, Thinking and Living the Cross in the Context of Islam," in D.E. Singh (ed), *Jesus and the Cross: Reflections of Christians from Islamic Contexts*, (Oxford: Regnum, 2008), 150.

4 The bare denial is usually based on Surah 4: 157. For extensive discussions of the interpretation of this verse, see T. Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A study in the History of Muslim Thought* (London: Oneworld, 2009) and J. Cumming, 'Did Jesus die on the cross? Reflections from Muslim commentaries' in J. Dudley Woodberry, O. Zümrüt and M. Köylü (eds), *Muslim and Christian Reflections on Peace: Divine and Human Dimensions* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2005), 32-50.

not only in words but also in life and, as the foundation of all, in the whole direction of thought and of prayer.

The question, ‘what should direct Christian responses to Islam?’ is of contemporary urgency as well as of historical and theological interest. As some have observed, the question of how we should view Islam has provoked a mighty ‘struggle for the soul of Christianity’⁵, not least amongst Christians living in areas where there have historically been very few Muslims, and where new Muslim immigrants form a small minority of the population. Such Christians may be aware in theory that Muslims comprise more than a fifth of the world’s population, and that the vast majority wish to live in security and in peaceful relationship with non-Muslims. However, their media and their literature are often full of reports of the minorities – of those who are active opponents of Christianity, of those who make life difficult for Christians, and of those who perpetrate violence in the name of Islam.

One of the (often unspoken) tensions underlying current debates is the question of whether the peaceful majority or the belligerent minority represents ‘true Islam’, and even whether we can actually categorise Muslims in this way. Do not the belligerent want, under their own terms, eventually to live at peace? Would

5 See, for example, the analyses of J. Azumah, “Christian Responses to Islam: A Struggle for the Soul of Christianity,” *Church & Society in Asia Today*, vol 13 no 2, 2010, 83–94. D. W. Brown, “Clash of Cultures or Clash of Theologies? A Critique of Some Contemporary Evangelical Responses to Islam,” *Cultural Encounters*, 1 (2004), 69–85. J. Cumming, “Toward Respectful Witness,” in Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), 319.

not the peaceful want, in some ways, to criticise Christianity and to bring the world under Islamic rule? But, if this is a ‘struggle for the soul of Christianity’, surely the prior question is not about how far any particular Muslims are friends or enemies, but about how, as followers of Jesus, we should live and minister amongst our fellow human beings. Should we have different principles for dealing with different kinds of Muslims? Is there any unifying principle for dealing with both those who wish to be our friends and with those who treat us as their enemies?

At a time when he was himself in prison for his faith, Paul wrote to a community experiencing persecution:

Only (‘whatever happens’ NIV) let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. . (Phil 1:28)⁶

They must not be quarreling amongst themselves, Paul goes on, but should be ‘striving side by side’ (1:27), not for their security or for their comfort, but ‘for the faith of the gospel’. It is important, then, that they should not be frightened of their opponents: rather, they should realise that both the destruction of the enemies of the gospel and the salvation of those who accept it are from God, and that their own current suffering is a gift from Him. How can suffering be a gift? Because, when it is ‘for the sake of Christ’, it is part of the fellowship they share with Him and with other believers.

6 Unless otherwise indicated, Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version and Qur’anic quotations from A. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur’an: translation and commentary*, first published 1934.

What difference would it make if we applied this to current Christian responses to Islam? First, we would not start with attempts to judge Muslims, but with determination to live lives which honour Christ. Second, we would not be fighting amongst ourselves, but working together. Third, our focus would not be social or political security, but the 'faith of the gospel'. Fourth, we would not be reacting out of fear, but out of assurance that God is well able to deal with both our sins and those of Muslim people. Finally, we would not be so shocked when we or other Christians suffer, but would offer up such suffering to the service of Christ. In sum, whether people treat us as friends or as enemies, our guiding principle would be the gospel.

Paul then takes us to the heart of the gospel, and of living by the gospel. The key thing is, he says, to have our minds shaped according to the mind of Jesus. 'Think like Him!' says Paul:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5-8)

Resurrection and exaltation soon followed, but that was, as Paul goes on to say, what God did: Jesus' path was towards humiliation

and death. The mind of Jesus directed Him to the Cross; and that will also be the direction of those who set their lives to follow Him.

In the context of a very different conflict, where the ‘enemies of the gospel’ were not the authorities who might imprison people but religious people who were insisting on circumcision, Paul again puts the cross at the heart of his response:

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal 2:19–20)

Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world. (Gal 6:14)

Galatians has a combative tone, very different from the more gentle tone of Philippians; yet it still expresses the importance of the follower of Jesus denying himself and focusing on the Cross. The context is particularly relevant to discussions of Islam: it is all about the roles of law and of grace in salvation, and that is also a question at the heart of discussion between Christians and Muslims⁷. How does living by the Cross relate to living by the Law? And what, then, might it mean for those who live by the Cross to relate to those who live by Islam and its *shari’ah*?

7 For thorough discussion of this, see the forthcoming book by my colleague, Shabbir Akhtar, *The New Testament in Muslim Eyes: Paul’s letter to the Galatians*, (Routledge, 2018).

If the Lord Jesus' life was directed towards the Cross, should not the Cross also direct all Christian responses to the world for which He died? If Paul directed himself and his readers towards the Cross in response to prison, to persecution and to arguments about law-based religion, should not the Cross also direct Christian responses to those Muslims who oppose them and treat them as enemies? In what follows, I will invite reflection on what 'direction towards the Cross' might mean in Islamic contexts, using examples from history, from current tense situations, and from the experience of Muslim background believers.

A HISTORICAL POINTER: THE CROSS AS THE CHRISTIAN *QIBLAH*⁸

Writing at a time when Christians were beginning to describe themselves as being persecuted by their Muslim rulers, and when conversion to Islam was being encouraged as a path towards tax relief and towards social and political position, Abu Ra'itah Takriti wrote this:

The cross is for us a *qiblah* and a glory (*majd*), deserving of exaltation and honour and devotion (*al-ikhlas*), and whoever takes up this *qiblah*, apart from (all) other things, is saved (*khalaṣa*).⁹

8 Direction for prayer.

9 In his treatise *On the Proof of the Christian Religion and the Proof of the Holy Trin-*

Abu Rai'ta wrote under Abbasid rule, in the mid 9th century, and lived in Takrit the ancient Christian city near the new capital of Baghdad. The above passage comes in one of his several apologetic writings: it comes from a section in which he is defending the Christian practice of venerating the Cross against accusations that this is a form of idolatry. On the contrary, he argues, venerating the Cross is a rejection of idolatry. First, the Cross is a 'despised form' (*shakl haqīr*), and Christians make their crosses from wood rather than from precious metals: this is already an indication that it is not an idol. Second, the revelation of God in the incarnation is what has delivered people from idolatry. Third, the Cross is God's sure sign (*'alam il-wakīd*): here, he is referring to the 'sign' of Jesus' second coming in Matthew 24:30. It points towards the honour and victory that is coming for Jesus, and also towards the judgement that is coming to His enemies. So¹⁰, asks Abu Ra'ita, if one wants a direction in which to turn for worship to God, how could they turn to anything other than God's *qiblah*? And he goes on to describe the Cross in the above words.

Since shortly after the *hijra* from Mecca to Medina, the *qiblah* for Muslims has been the Ka'abah in Mecca. The change from praying towards Jerusalem is mentioned in the Qur'an in Surah 2:142-5. The following verse indicates that this will differentiate

ity, slightly amended from the translation in S.T. Keating, *Defending the 'People of Truth' in the Early Islamic Period: the Christian Apologies of Abu Ra'itah*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 132-135.

10 There is some corrupt text between the statement about the Cross as sign and this question, *Ibid.*, 132-133.

Muslims from the ‘People of the Book’, and that those people will refuse to accept the new *qiblah*. Abu Ra’ita never explicitly mentions Muslims or Islam, but he uses this Islamic vocabulary to both explain and argue for Christian devotion to the Cross. His context is, as we have seen, an ‘apology’ for the Christian faith; but it is important to remember that such an apology would not only have been addressed to Muslims. It is very likely that, even more than trying to justify the faith to Muslim objectors, he was seeking to assure Christians of the truth of Christianity, and to encourage them to be faithful to Christ.

In particular, Abu Ra’ita asserts that the Cross, the ‘despised form’, is not only our *qiblah* but also our glory. We are reminded of Paul’s, ‘Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Gal 6v14). This is a direction for the whole of our lives, and not just a physical sign of a physical direction which many Christians place at the front of their churches. It is not something of which we should be ashamed, but something in which we should glory.

This glorious thing, says Abu Ra’ita, should not be hidden but should be magnified. Far from being ashamed of it, we should honour it. And then he uses the Arabic word, *al-ikhlaṣ*. The reader of the Qur’an will immediately recognize this as the title of Surah 112, the great statement of Islamic monotheism which is said to be worth a third of the Qur’an:

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Say: He is Allah, the One and Only
 Allah, the Eternal, Absolute;
 He begetteth not, nor is He begotten;
 And there is none like unto Him,

The root *kh-l-ṣ* indicates purification, and its various forms develop to denote integrity, sincerity, devotion, liberation and salvation. The Surah title is generally translated ‘Purity’ or ‘Sincerity’ because reciting it is said to purify a person from *shirk* (associating anything with God). An alternative title is ‘*Tawḥīd* – Unity – which indicates its powerful monotheistic content. As a recent translator explains, ‘*Ikh-lāṣ* conveys the meaning of sincerity in one’s religion and total dedication to the One true God.’¹¹

We do not know what was in Abu Ra’ita’s mind when he twice used *kh-l-ṣ* in our short quotation; but we can clearly see the implication that the Cross is the single object of the Christian’s sincere devotion, and that the Cross and the Cross alone is the way to purifying salvation. From this quotation, he goes on to say,

We, the Christian community, worship our Lord and our God, and do not worship another god from among creatures.

Our monotheism is, he is saying, characterized by a single-minded focus on the Cross and all it stands for, and that, he implies, is our path to purification from all false worship.

11 M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: A New Translation*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), 444.

CURRENT SITUATIONS: THE CROSS AS A DIRECTION FOR THE LIFE AND THOUGHT

The Muslim *qiblah* of the Ka'abah is not only the geographical direction of prayer: it is also the holy place which represents sacred history – the place which Adam founded, which Abraham restored and where Muhammad received revelation. It is the place where millions go for pilgrimage and which symbolizes the heart of religion and of relationship with God for Muslim people. Similarly, when Abu Ra'ita writes of the Cross as *qiblah*, and of the east as the more general direction of prayers, he links this with the idea that the east was the place where Adam lived before the fall, and therefore reminds the believer of 'the first home' to which she longs to return. It is also the direction from which Jesus will come again, and Jerusalem is the place in which Jesus lived, died and rose again. Thus, whether he speaks of the east as a physical direction, or of the Cross as a metaphorical direction, he is speaking of a direction of thought and of life. The implication is that the Cross as *qiblah* should make a difference to all that we say and think and do. In particular, it situates our worship as well as our lives in the context of the whole of salvation history, with the Cross as its centre and the slain Lamb as its Lord.

What, then, can today's Christians learn from this brother whose people were having to learn to live under Muslim rule? He might give us a clue as to how we can explain our focus on the

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Cross to Muslims; but he can also challenge us on how we live faithfully as Christians. Taking the Cross as *qiblah* implies a focus for prayer: in particular, looking at the Cross reminds us that Jesus died for the sinners who put Him there, so we are called again and again to repentance, both as individuals and as communities. That takes us back to the question of how we should be responding to Muslims: how do we know from what we should be repenting, and to what we should turn? I want to suggest that the test question is whether we are not only facing the Cross in prayer, but also aligning ourselves and our lives with the Crossward direction of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. In the rest of this paper, we consider what this might mean for Christian responses to Islam and to Muslim people. We will continue to learn from Scripture and from history, but we will also hear from people who are directing their lives towards the Cross in some very difficult situations in today's world.

A Glorious *Qiblah* of Self-Giving Love

Why did Jesus direct His life towards the Cross? He did it out of love; for His Father as well as for humankind. Philippians 2 describes His 'mind': 'He emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death. . .' Taking the Cross as *qiblah* implies self-giving, service, humility and obedience, all out of love for our heavenly Father and for the people for whom Jesus died; and that includes Muslims.

Putting this into practice amongst friendly Muslims is relatively easy: in violent situations, it can be a huge challenge. One such situation is Northern Nigeria, where there have been outbreaks of violence over several decades, and where Boko Haram has been causing havoc for several years. Jos, in Plateau State, is an area which was peaceful until 2001, when violence broke out. Since then, some Christians have responded to violence with violence, fear and suspicion have multiplied between Muslim and Christian communities, and people have moved so that previously mixed areas are now segregated. Christians now avoid Muslim areas and Muslim traders, and Muslims avoid Christian areas and Christian traders.

In this tense situation, a group of Christians determined to be faithful to Jesus started an initiative called ‘Love Language’. They explain:

Starting in Jos and spreading elsewhere in Northern Nigeria, Christians are engaging our Muslim neighbours in conversation in our Father’s language of love, in such a way as to transform our relationships.

From time to time certain Muslims have been talking to us in their mother tongue, violence; we have been learning to reply in this language, arguing that it is the one they understand. But most of the time we have stood well apart from them, folding our arms. Neither is Christ’s way.¹²

12 <http://newlifening.blogspot.co.uk/p/love-language.html>

If neither hostility nor separation is ‘Christ’s way’, what is ‘Christ’s way’? Their answer is that it is the way of love. Their major aim is to ‘bring love to its rightful place at the heart of the life of the church’, then ‘to help Christians to express that love to Muslims’. They thus want to ‘transform relationships between Christian and Muslim communities’ and eventually to ‘lead Muslims into God’s loving family through faith in Christ.’

They have, therefore, involved many like-minded Christians, and developed resources which challenge hostile attitudes, help to heal the trauma of previous violence, and equip people with the practical as well as the verbal ‘language of love’. They do not, however, immediately jump to exhorting Christians to love Muslims: they begin by explaining that the real enemy is not Muslims, but Satan, who has always been a liar and a murderer (John 8:44). While Satan may use Muslims to further his murderous lying agenda, Christians need to beware of furthering his agenda by reacting violently to Muslims or by neglecting to find and to speak the truth about Muslims. The basic idea is that, whatever others may do, Christian people should make sure that they are furthering Jesus’ agenda and not Satan’s agenda: otherwise, they are in danger of doing their faith more damage than any enemy could do to it. A graphic illustration is used:

When the owner of a rival china shop comes into your shop to fight you, you are foolish if you cooperate, because you inevitably lose: even if you beat him up, your shop is de-

stroyed while his remains intact.¹³

The programme goes on to some careful study of the causes and extent of violence between Christians and Muslims, explaining the social, political and environmental factors which mean that this is always much more complicated than a simple Christian-Muslim battle. This both stresses the importance of truthful understanding and gives people the opportunity of talking about their observations and their experiences, and they can go on to consider how to improve the situation. It is important that the questions are not only spiritual: participants are encouraged to think through their responsibilities and opportunities for social and political action; but this is always to be on the basis of 'love language'.

Other sessions include a time of meditation and prayer using Psalm 73, a study of Jesus and the Samaritans¹⁴, and a session on Jesus as our friend and as the friend of all sorts of other people. The greatest love for friends is, participants are reminded, laying down one's life: Jesus laid down His life not only for His friends but for His enemies (Rom 5:8); and He calls his friends to obey Him (John 15:14) and to be part of a very different kind of kingdom than the kingdoms of this world (John 18:36).

And what is at the heart of their message? A double session which asks, 'What is genuine Christianity?' answers that ques-

13 From 'Love Language' teaching notes received from Mark Hopkins of the Theological College of Northern Nigeria.

14 For a discussion of the parallels between the Samaritans of Jesus' time and the Muslims of our time, see my *Thinking Biblically about Islam*, 302-306.

tion: genuine Christianity, which Satan wants to destroy, is ‘the way of the Cross’.

The cross isn’t to be visited once at conversion but must lie at the heart of our daily living. There isn’t another way of being a Christian – if you don’t carry your cross you cannot be a disciple of Jesus. Genuine Christianity is the way of the cross.

Does that fit your worldview? If not, you face the choice the Pharisees faced: do you reject Jesus and scripture, or do you throw out that worldview and replace it with another? Do not forget these words of Jesus, ‘anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple’ (Lk. 14.27).¹⁵

A measure of Love Language’s success can be seen in the prayer I heard in a Bible College chapel in the Jos area during a time of Boko Haram violence: ‘Lord, if we were to pray what we feel today, we would ask you to pay them back what they have done to us; but we will not pray like that.’ And the student prayed fervently for God’s blessing on the perpetrators of the violence, for their repentance, for their salvation, and for their families. ,

Whilst some Muslims might admire such a response to violence, others would find the model of self-giving love strange. Should not self-defence rather than self-giving be the response

15 ‘Love Language’ teaching notes.

of a religious community to threat? This is more than a question of the ethics of forgiveness and retaliation: there are acute questions of justice, and the legal as well as the ethical questions surrounding the legitimacy, limits and obligations of self-defence are issues for Christians and secularists as well as for Muslims. In Islamic legal discourse, self-defence is considered obligatory for the Muslim community in some circumstances, and Surah 4:75 implies that religious persecution is one of these¹⁶. For Christians in Northern Nigeria (and elsewhere), the questions are more about the respective roles of federal and state governments, and how Christian communities should act when these authorities are ineffective. The student's prayer does not imply any loss of concern for justice, but rather a recognition of the perpetrators as fellow human beings whose injustices were eternally carried on the Cross, and, as we shall see in the next section, that makes a huge difference to how Christians might think about what they are defending when they defend their communities.

Similarly, while Muslims are generally happy to agree that Jesus, as the Servant of God, was willing to obey God even to death, they find it difficult to accept that God could have allowed such a shameful death to His prophet. A believer from Muslim background reflects:

We were taught that Allah is an unknown and so powerful

16 For an Analysis of Some Important 20th Century Discussions, see M.M. Ahmad, "The Scope of Self-Defence: a Comparative Study of Islamic and Modern International law," *Islamic Studies*, vol 49, no 2, (2010): 155-194.

God who is the lord of everything so it was difficult to accept that he became known in a human form and then let other creatures kill him in such a painful way.¹⁷

That Christians should honour a symbol of weakness has been a recurring Muslim criticism since the early days. The criticism is not only that God's Messiah should not have suffered such a death, but that putting such a symbol at the heart of faith is ridiculous. 'Why do you adore the bones of Apostles and Prophets, and pictures and the cross, which anciently served, according to the law, as an instrument of torture?' Umar II, the Muslim caliph asks Leo III, the Byzantine emperor, in an Armenian History from the 9th or 10th century¹⁸. Both the dates of Armenian History and the authenticity of the 'Umar–Leo correspondence are disputed, and the context of the criticism is the broader Muslim objection to Christian devotions as idolatry; but the question singles out the cross because of its shameful and humiliating implications. How can we honour an 'instrument of torture?'

Leo's answer is simple: 'we honour the Cross because of the sufferings of that Word of God incarnate borne thereon', and he goes on to cite what he sees as Old Testament precedents¹⁹. Many

17 The quotations from believers from Muslim background in this paper are responses to a small-scale survey in which I asked people, 'How did you come to an understanding of the Cross?'

18 Jeffery, A., "Ghevond's Text of the Correspondence between 'Umar II and Leo III," *The Harvard Theological Review* vol. 37, no. 4 (Oct., 1944), 278.

19 *Ibid.*, 322. The OT/Apocrypha precedents are the plate worn on Aaron's forehead (Ex 28:36–38), and the wood/trees mentioned in Is 60:13, Wisdom 14:7 and Prov 3:18.

others since that time have focussed on affirming the Cross as the place of the Messiah's redemptive suffering, and as an example for Christians of humility, service and martyrdom.

In another current example, a Coptic bishop reflects on terrorist attacks in Egypt:

You are Loved

Once again, we find ourselves experiencing pain before which words seem insufficient, I have previously addressed victims of terrorist acts; I have addressed their families; I have even addressed those who may have had an opportunity, even in some small way, to advocate for or support those most vulnerable. This time however, I feel a need to address those who perpetrate these Crimes:

You are loved. The violent and deadly crimes you perpetrate are abhorrent and detestable, but YOU are loved.

You are loved by God, your Creator, for He created you in His Image and according to His Likeness, and placed you on this earth for much greater things, according to His plan for all humankind. You are loved by me and millions like me, not because of what you do, but what you are capable of as that wonderful creation of God, Who has created us with a shared humanity. You are loved by me and millions like me because I, and we, believe in transformation.

Transformation is core to the Christian message for throughout history we have seen many transformed from being those

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who persecuted Christ Himself and Christians, to those who went on to live with grace. We believe in transformation because, on a daily basis, we are personally transformed from a life of human weakness and sinfulness to a life of power and righteousness. We believe in transformation because the whole message of the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is to take humanity from the bonds of sin and death to a liberation in goodness and everlasting life. Our world is certainly suffering from the brokenness of our humanity, but it is our responsibility, personally and collectively, to encourage and inspire ourselves, and all those whom we meet along our path, to a life of virtue and holiness, and the love and forgiveness of all.

This of course, is far from the reaction that many may have expected, but the Christian message is just that, to look at our world as through the eyes of God, Who loves all and Who desires that all be liberated through Him.

I grieve, certainly for those who have lost their lives, for those who mourn, and for those who will continue to be adversely affected by these tragic experiences; but I also grieve for a young man who sees it not only justifiable, but glorious, to take the lives of other young men and women, and deprive his and their families of enjoying them as they grow and mature . . .

I also grieve for those who considered it a victory to board a bus filled with pilgrims and execute children, women and men purely for refusing to renounce their Faith, as we saw

happen to Coptic Christians in Menia only yesterday.

It is increasingly obvious is that many of these attacks come about due to a loss of the meaning and comprehension of the sanctity of life, our own or that of others; so join me in praying for the brokenness of our world that causes parents to lose their children, children to lose their parents, and humankind to lose the humanity for which it was created.²⁰

Yet again, we see how the Cross and its aftermath as the centre of life and faith moves Christians towards love for Muslim people, even in the most difficult situations. How, we wonder, can Christians be less loving towards Muslims in situations where it is the Muslims who are in the minority, and who are in need of the friendship of their Christian neighbours?

A Glorious *Qiblah* of God-Given Power

Why did Jesus direct His life towards the Cross? For the joy that was set before Him (Heb 12:2), Hebrews 12 is calling believers to keep 'looking to Jesus', and reminding them that He went right through the shame of the Cross to the place of glory and authority designated by 'the right hand of the throne of God'. Facing the *qiblah* of the Cross points us through present loss to

20 His Grace Bishop Angaelos, General Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the United Kingdom, 30 May 2017, <http://copticcentre.blogspot.co.uk/search?q=you+are+loved>, used by permission. Note that Bishop Angaelos also speaks out against violence against non-Christian minorities, including, at the time of writing this paper, the Rohingya Muslims in Burma, <http://copticcentre.blogspot.co.uk/> (September 8th 2017).

eventual glory, and helps us to live in the power of the already accomplished resurrection and glorification of Jesus our Lord. Philippians 2 has the same pattern, reminding us that, following His obedience to death, God ‘highly exalted Him . . .’ (v9). This is never a power that can be grasped, but only a power that it given. Jesus, as His followers are to do after Him, sets His direction towards the Cross, and God raises Him up.

Christian minorities in Islamic contexts have long shared this vision, and have used it in their explanation of the Cross to Muslim interlocutors. The Cross is not only the place of suffering but also, as Abu Ra’ita says, a glorious thing: it is the place of victory. It is on the Cross that the Messiah defeated sin and Satan and brought life out of death. In his late 8th century account, Mar Timothy, representing the Nestorian church before the caliph Al-Mahdi, explains the reason for Cross veneration: ‘Because it is the cause of life.’²¹ Without His death on the Cross, Jesus could not have been raised to life, and we would have no assurance of our own resurrection. That is why the Cross is not, as Al-Mahdi had asserted, a symbol of death, but a symbol of life and immortality. Mar Timothy continues:

God who at the beginning ordered light to come out of darkness, who sweetened bitter water in bitter wood, who through the sight of a deadly serpent granted life to the children of

21 Mingana, A., (ed. and trans). *The Apology of Timothy the Patriarch before the Caliph Mahdi.*, (Manchester: Woodbrooke Studies No.3., Bulletin of the John Rylands Library, 1928), 39.

Israel—handed to us the fruit of life from the wood of the Cross, and caused rays of immortality to shine upon us from the branches of the Cross. As we honour the roots because of the fruits that come out of them, so also we honour the Cross as the root of which the fruit of life was born to us, and from which the ray of immortality shone upon us.²²

Many early texts also exalt the Cross as the place where the Messiah defeated Satan and all the powers of darkness²³. The power of the Cross was seen not only in salvation received but also in miracles done under its symbolism. There are accounts of demons and of sicknesses dealt with through the power of the Cross, and even of poison being made harmless when the Name of Jesus is invoked and the sign of the Cross is made over it²⁴. In today's world, too, the power of the Cross can be seen in the Muslim world as people come to faith in Jesus Christ and as many are healed from sicknesses and delivered from evil powers²⁵.

But 'Power' is a problematic concept: key questions for Christians relating to Muslims today are, 'What kinds of power do we, in our various situations, have?' and 'What kinds of power should we exercise?' These were also the questions which faced the Jews of Jesus time in their relations with their Ro-

22 Ibid, 40.

23 See Tieszen, *Cross Veneration*, 83–85.

24 See Tieszen, *Cross Veneration*, 84–87.

25 For an overview of movements to Christ in recent decades, see D. Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is drawing Muslims around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* (Pennsylvania: Anchor Distributors, 2014).

man rulers: how should they regard their status under Caesar? What should they be doing about it? How should they expect God to act on their behalf, and how could they hasten His action? These were the sorts of questions to which Jesus was responding when He told Jewish leaders of opposing opinions, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s’ (Matt 22:21); when He challenged the Roman governor, ‘My kingdom is not of this world’ (John 18:36); and His continuing challenge rings down the millennia to His followers, ‘If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from this world.’ The message is clear: there is no earthly authority which can give Jesus His kingdom, or which can stop Him from being king, so there is no physical fighting which can establish His kingdom. Defending the Christian community does not necessarily mean defending the Kingdom of God. In this case, physical fighting would have actually deflected Jesus from His direction to the Cross: His servants were not to try to do that. Indeed, Peter was called ‘Satan’ when he tried verbally to change Jesus’ direction (Matt 16:23).

At a social and political level, the power questions can be different according whether Christians are in a minority or a majority, and depending on whether they are under a form of government which encourages the full participation of all citizens or not. It is, of course, important, that all ‘render to Caesar what is

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Caesar's' – that is, that all fulfil their responsibilities as citizens of whatever earthly kingdom they may belong to²⁶ – and Jesus death and resurrection did, eventually, have a huge impact on Roman power. However, if we take the Cross as the *qiblah* which determines the direction of our power as well as of our weakness, that will both transform our relationship to earthly powers and make sure that we keep a focus on the greater kingdom which is not of this world and therefore cannot be propagated or bestowed from this world.

Biblically, keeping the Cross as our *qiblah* can be a constant reminder of the authority and the universal power of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus. As Peter pronounced on the day of Pentecost, it was 'this Jesus, who you crucified' whom God made 'both Lord and Messiah' (Acts 2:36, my emphasis); and 'Lord', as Caesar's title, has political implications. The Pentecost sermon makes the point repeatedly. It emphasises in graphic detail the reality of the crucifixion (Acts 2:23), but it also insists that this was according to God's plan, and that it resulted in resurrection (v24–31) and in the ascension of Jesus to a position of full authority and power (32–35). Facing the Cross in prayer, then, implies also facing the resurrection and ascension. Directing our lives towards the Cross means that we live under the authority of Jesus, but also that we live in the world in full assurance of His power over all

26 This raises huge issues, which are beyond the scope of the present paper, M. Girma and C. Romocea (eds), *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East: Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?* (London & Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017) offers a range of biblically-based perspectives.

things. The attitudes of the Egyptian Christians expressed above are incomprehensible apart from the assurance that God is in full control, and that martyrdom leads to life: this, as much as the forgiveness and humility of the Cross, is the 'true meaning of Easter' to which they refer.

Understanding the Cross through the subsequent resurrection and ascension of Jesus is not contentious for Christians; but there have been periods in which the assurance of Christ's lordship has been extended by Christians into seeking for temporal Christian power, and that has included some very problematic understandings the power of the Cross.

The cross, says Abu Ra'ita, is God's 'sure sign upon the earth', and he links it to the 'sign' of Jesus' second coming (Matt 24:30). It is, he notes, a sign that brings fear to Jesus' enemies. Since Constantine's dream of the Cross accompanied by the words, 'In this sign, conquer,' the Cross had also been a symbol of Christian political and even military power. The Christianized empire which produced the Byzantine empire of Muhammad's time had fused the earthly and heavenly kingdoms to the point where the Byzantine emperor was seen as the representative of Christ's rule on earth. So it is not surprising that one dimension of the Cross debate at the time of Abu Ra'ita was political: Muslim rulers had been limiting and even forbidding public display of the Cross as a symbol of Christian presence (and implied power) as Islamic rule developed, and Islamic symbols came to dominate public space.

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At a later stage, the Cross would become the sign under which the crusading armies from the Western Christian peoples fought Jews and Eastern Christians as well as Muslims.

I have argued elsewhere that the use of the Cross as a symbol of political and military power is a travesty of Christian faith and what one of my Muslims colleagues would call ‘treason to the cause of Jesus Christ’²⁷. Here, I want to note that the temptation to political and military power is not one that we can consign to history. It is an ever-present temptation against which the Church of Jesus Christ needs to be on its guard, not least in Islamic contexts where politics and religion are intertwined.

Here is the Coptic bishop again, exhorting his people to resist such temptations in a context of terrible violence:

What has caused me great concern is the recent use of the phrase ‘I am of the Nation of the Cross’ on social media, in response to the brutal murder of 21 Coptic Christians in Libya. While many are innocently using this terminology to identify with the bravery and sacrifice of these men, as Christians it is essential that we understand that there is no room for the concept of ‘a nation of the Cross’ within Christianity as our nation is not of this world “for here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come” (Hebrews 13:14).

²⁷ *Crusade Sermons, Francis of Assisi and Martin Luther: What Does It Mean to ‘Take up the Cross’ in the Context of Islam?* (Oxford: CMS Crowther Centre Monograph no. 14, 2009).

In the video that shows the martyrdom of these faithful men, one that I personally could not watch in its entirety due to the sheer brutality and degradation of humanity presented, the perpetrators of this heinous crime claimed to carry it out as a way of sending a message to the ‘people and nation of the cross.’ While it is understandable that many are responding to this in an act of defiance and solidarity by using the Cross as a profile on social media, association with the concept of the ‘nation of the Cross’ is in actual fact problematic, and even detrimental. We do of course associate ourselves with the Cross as it is central to who we are, as demonstrated in the words of Saint Paul “God forbid that [we] should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus” (Galatians 6:14), but the concept of ‘nation of the cross’ bears many negative implications and is contrary to Christian teaching and understanding.

As Christians, we have everlasting life and the kingdom of God as our concept of nation, as our desire and our goal. We must therefore not use terminology superimposed onto us as our identity because it implies that as a ‘nation of the Cross’ we separate ourselves from the rest of humanity. As Christians, we are gathered as the Body of Christ, but do not see ourselves as separate from the rest of humanity; on the contrary, are called to be in the world as ambassadors and stewards “You are the light of the world...Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.”(Matt 5:14–16).

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To “take up our Cross and follow Christ” (Luke 9:23) is different to declaring ourselves a nation with the Cross as its flag. The Cross was never meant to be a symbol of triumphalism but rather, one of sacrifice and humility, which we as the Body of Christ must emulate “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me”

The implication of this divisive terminology is that we as a ‘nation’ of Christians are at war and at enmity with the ‘nation (Uma) of Islam’, which is of course not the case, and we must not be coerced into a state of enmity; as Christians we have no enemies as we are called to love all equally “...love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). Even if others consider themselves our enemies and chose to ‘spitefully use and persecute [us]’ (Matthew 5:44), we are called to love and forgive even to the end.²⁸

A Glorious *Qiblah* of Gracious Good News

Why did Jesus direct His life towards the Cross? For the salvation of the world. The Cross as *qiblah* directs Christians to self-giving love and to God-given power not only for their own benefit, but for the salvation of others for whom Christ died. The Cross is good news.

Turning towards the Cross, then, leads the believer to want

28 Bishop Angaelos, of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, <http://copticouthuk.blogspot.co.uk/2015/03/we-are-not-nation-of-cross.html> Used with permission.

others to turn towards it; and Muslims are no exception. The unique challenge of Islam is that the Cross is not only an ideological stumbling block and theological foolishness to Muslims: they are also brought up with the belief that Jesus did not die on the Cross. As one believer from Muslim background explains:

Theologically, I was taught that God almighty would never allow his beloved Messiah to die shamefully on the cross. He would help the Messiah by rescuing him from the hands of his enemies. Therefore God did not let him go on the cross. In the Quran there was no theological/doctrinal reason for the cross anyway.

Historically, it was taught in Islamic studies that the crucifixion did not happen. It was not considered a historical fact but fiction.

The denial of the historicity of the cross may seem perverse to the Christian reader and, indeed, to other non-Muslims. Of all the claims of the gospels, the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross is, perhaps, the only one that has not been disputed by historical-critical scholars. The standard Islamic response (that it looked like that to all those concerned, but that, in fact, God made someone else look like Jesus and took Jesus up into heaven) is based on Surah 4:157-8:

They (the Jews) said (in boast), 'We killed Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah.' But they killed him not, nor

crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only a conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not – nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself, and Allah is exalted in Power, Wise.

From the earliest Islamic times, there have been commentators who have recognized that the standard interpretation is problematic²⁹. For example, this would imply that God deceived people for 600 years. Further, if God made someone else look like Jesus, how can we ever be sure that anyone is the person whom we think they are? Christians may add that the verses do not deny that Jesus died, but that the Jews killed him, and that the context is countering a Jewish boast of power over the Messiah. They may also point out that the Qur'an has other verses that might support the historicity of Jesus death (3:55, 5:119, 19:33).

The theological reasons for denial can help us to understand why, in the face of such difficulties, Muslims persist in insisting that Jesus did not die. First, from within the Islamic view of Jesus, there are concerns about what God might permit for His Messiah, and the denial of the fall and therefore of the need for redemption: the Cross is both unjust and unnecessary. Then, there are objections to the Christian idea that Jesus, as God incarnate died: how could God die? It just doesn't make sense!

Rather than examining ways of dealing with these objec-

29 See the commentators discussed in the references in note 4 above.

tions³⁰, I want here to present how some Muslims report on their journey from facing away from the Cross to turning towards the Cross and following Christ crucified. We note that there is likely to be a stage at which Muslims need human help on their way towards understanding the Cross.³¹ However, in nearly every case, reason is insufficient: experience is essential³². There needs to be divine intervention, whether through dreams, through encounters or through Scripture,

Sometimes, the experience comes first. Here is someone who met the living Jesus through encounter with His people, and only after having quite literally left all to follow Him began his journey of understanding³³:

Before Jesus saved me, I had no idea what the Cross was or symbolized. In one of my Arabic education lessons, I was told that the Cross is an idol worshipped by the followers of Isa, who I later knew was Jesus. I was never introduced to the meaning of the Cross by my Islam teachers. To be sincere, my understanding of the Cross and its significance came af-

30 For a short and clear analysis of early Christian responses to Muslim objections to the Cross, see M.I. Beaumont, "Debating the Cross in early Christian dialogues with Muslims," in D.E. Singh (ed), *Jesus and the Cross: Reflections of Christians from Islamic contexts*, (Oxford: Regnum, 2008), 155–64.

31 There is not space here to explore ways of doing this, The various papers in D.E. Singh (ed), *Jesus and the Cross* are a good starting point for study.

32 Belief in the crucifixion and the resurrection was never founded on logic or other philosophy, but on the witness of the first disciples that these things really happened. That is why reason is not sufficient in itself. The role of reason is to make sense of the observed reality.

33 This person's story can be found at www.passionforconverts.com/about-us/my-journey-to-salvation/.

ter I was saved, I knew the true meaning of the Cross when I started studying theology. I appreciate my teachers who shaped my understanding. (Nigeria)

Sometimes, the experience is so strong that the Cross is easily accepted; but there follows a struggle to understand:

I did not have issues with the divinity of Christ and his death on the Cross. I was convinced beyond reasonable doubt that the message of the gospel was true because of my unique spiritual experiences following my conversion. Despite my convictions, I was baffled by the notion of one man dying for the sins of many. The nagging question in my mind was “how can the death and blood of one man atone for the sins of many?” I wasn’t repelled by the Cross per se because I understood the concept of sacrifice. What troubled me further and raised questions in my mind was when a preacher in a service mentioned that the cross is a symbol of a curse. He quoted Galatians 3:13 to support his claim. It reads “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree··”(NRSV). This really worried me because in my mind the Cross is the symbol of Christianity, a symbol of salvation, so if it symbolised a curse, does that mean I am cursed or do I carry a curse?

I didn’t discuss this issue openly with my pastor or Christian friends. It was through teaching services in Church, espe-

cially during Easter, Bible studies and the personal reading of other Christian literature on the cross of Christ that I began to understand the meaning of the Cross. Reading Galatians 3:13 in its context also clarified issues regarding the cross for me. (Ghana)

Sometimes, a vivid experience suddenly opens a fresh understanding:

When I became a Christian, I did see the Cross as a weak point of Christianity. However, since I was influenced by communism, I decided to deny Christ as God and see him as a great man who died on the Cross so millions of people can live. I was happy with my interpretation until one day I recollected a childhood memory: It was summer and we were at our summerhouse in a nice village in Iran. I was around nine or ten years old. One day my father came home unexpectedly very early in the morning (my father and older brothers were in the city). This got my mother worried but he reassured her that everything was fine with the boys, and then called for me. When he saw me, he kissed me and thanked God, then he told my mother that he had a dream a night before. In his dream, he lost me and he could not find me. He started to bargain with God (my father was agnostic) asking to give him his daughter back instead he would sacrifice an animal. Although he did not find me in his dream, he kept his promise and went and got a lamb and sacrificed it the same

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day for God in my replacement. Remembering this, suddenly the importance of Cross become obvious to me. (Iran)

Sometimes, understanding comes directly from the Bible. Here is someone who, after a long journey of seeking, found there his answers to both the theological and historical questions about the Cross as he was finding his answers to all the other questions that Islam raised for him:

When I started studying the Bible I was amazed to see the theological reason for the cross from Genesis 3 (15, 21) and throughout the scriptures. Four gospel accounts of the cross were more than enough to convince me the historicity of the cross.

I think the Biblical evidence of the cross is powerfully convincing for any Muslim person who is honestly open to explore. People who deny the cross they are the one who do not want to study and accept the truth may be because of the cost. (Pakistan)

The journey can be difficult, and the consequences costly, but many who have taken it testify that it is worthwhile: like their Lord, they see the joy set before them. Here is one:

God has blessed us a lot as well as given us many of challenges. In the midst of all these challenges, the Cross and its message is a great role model for me. If the Lord's solution for the challenge of sin and death is the Cross, then we/I

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should follow his footsteps.

For those Christians who, like myself, were committed Muslims, accepting death of God was unimaginable. . . . It did make a sense for me when I understood why God in Christ went to the Cross and that the Cross was not the end of the story. Actually, the Cross revealed to me the depth of God's love and how far he is willing to go to show his love. It made perfect sense when I looked at it rationally, although it also created a lot more questions.

Since then, on my journey with Christ, the concept of Cross and resurrection have helped me to deal with my personal and ministerial challenges. At the pinnacle of pains and difficulties, it is the Cross which brings me/us hope of resurrection. In the darkest place of my/our hearts it is the Cross which shouting instead of me/us 'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' Then I realise that God has already been in my situation, so He understands me (Allah, perhaps has no clue of this feeling) and he is willing to give me/us a new beginning.

Today I still learn about the Cross of Christ and there are many unanswered questions around it for me. But one thing is crystal clear: if there was not the Cross of Christ I would not have had the same life and the same relationship with God today. I would have been definitely more miserable.
(Refugee in the UK)

A Glorious *Qiblah* for Enduring Worship

Why did Jesus direct His life towards the Cross? Because the One True God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is entirely good, entirely loving and entirely holy. It is the Cross which displays the extent to which human injustice can go, but it is also the Cross which resolves the tensions between God's holy justice and God's loving desire to save. It is, then, the Cross which displays the heart of God's goodness, and which reveals His worthiness of worship.

A *qiblah* is, primarily and, for Muslims and for Abu Ra'ita, literally, a direction for worship. The Cross as a Christian *qiblah* directs worship not towards a piece of dead wood, but towards the Risen Lamb, who still bears the marks of the Cross and whom the saints declare worthy because He died on the Cross.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing! (Rev 5:12)

Revelation 5 offers some important insights:

First, this is not only an individual matter. As the direction of the Ka'abah aligns Muslims across the globe, so the direction of the Cross aligns Christians not only with the life of the Lord Jesus but also with other believers past, present and future. As Muslims around the world bow down towards the Ka'abah in prayer, so the elders and living creatures of heaven bow before

the Lamb (Rev 5:8, 14). The Cross as *qiblah* offers a way towards the ‘with one mind striving side-by-side’ of Phil 1:27.

Second, this is worship in places of difficulty. Revelation, like Philippians, was written from prison and to churches under pressure and persecution. Its first readers shared the cry of the ‘souls of those who have been slain’ around the altar, ‘O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood?’ (Rev 6:10). The glimpse of the heavenly worship assures them of ultimate justice, and calls them to persevere through the difficulties by continuing to worship.

Third, this is not only about ‘us’. The Lamb is declared ‘worthy’ not only because the Cross bought salvation for ‘us’, but because His blood ‘ransomed people for God from every tribe, language, people and nation’ (Rev 5:9). Christians bow towards the Lamb who died for Muslims as well as for themselves, and rejoice to find Muslims turning to bow to Him.

Fourth, this is not only about now. The Cross and all that it symbolizes makes Jesus worthy to ‘open the scroll’ of history (Rev 5:9). Revelation is a graphic unveiling of the control of God over nations and rulers and wars and persecutions and storms of all sorts; and it is Jesus and Jesus alone who is considered worthy of opening the scrolls that show the meaning of history. Directing worship towards the Cross assures us that there is meaning and that the Lord is in ultimate control, no matter how difficult the present situation.

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Finally, this is about empowerment. Rev 5:10 announces,

You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on earth.

The small, struggling, persecuted churches are being told that, as those ransomed by the blood of Jesus, they somehow share His kingdom. Eventually, they will ‘reign’. In a sense, they are already in a place of more power than the Roman authorities who are persecuting them, because they are part of the kingdom which is above all earthly kingdoms. This thread runs through the whole of Revelation.

As we have already seen, turning towards the Cross as *qiblah* reminds us of its victory, but also keeps our eyes on the fact that the victory is not that of an earthly kingdom. Revelation reveals the fact that the heavenly kingdom is far greater and more enduring than any earthly power. In the end, it teaches, God Himself will defeat all earthly powers which oppose the Lamb; but there is no hint that Christians should fight those powers other than with their testimonies and with their prayers. On the contrary, those who ‘reign on earth’ are those who have refused to be part of the earthly ‘beast’s’ kingdom and who have literally been beheaded for their testimony (Rev 20:4). This follows the Philippians 2 pattern: the followers of Jesus direct their minds and their lives towards the Cross, and God raises them up.

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Here is a recent reflection from Egypt on worship, martyrdom and the meaning of Easter. It was less than a year since a row of Egyptian Christians had been very publically beheaded by adherents of 'ISIS', and now two bombs had been exploded during worship on the Sunday before Easter. The Bible Society of Egypt responded:

Palm Sunday is one of the busiest days on our church calendar. Egyptian Christians carry intricately woven palm branches. They chant "Hosanna to the King of Kings." It is a day of joyful celebration.

When the first bomb exploded, many robed chanters participating in the liturgy exchanged their now-bloodied, earthly robes for martyrs' robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb (Revelation 7:14). A few hours later, the second bomb exploded in Alexandria as a suicide bomber detonated his explosive device outside Saint Mark's Church. Altogether, 46 people went from celebrating by faith to celebrating by sight, meeting their savior face to face. Many more were wounded. The funerals were a mixture of wailing and rejoicing, as a bishop explained:

"True, we love martyrdom. But we also love life. We don't hate life on earth. God created us on earth to live, not die. The fact that we accept death doesn't mean our blood is cheap, and it doesn't mean that it doesn't matter to us. We do not commit suicide. But we witness for Christ, whether by our lives or by our transition to heaven. If we live, we live for

the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord.”

In many instances, Muslims who are outraged at the blind and evil hatred of this atrocity, have expressed frustration with Christians in all their talk of love and forgiveness. As with previous attacks, the sense of revenge is minimal as families embrace martyrdom as a gift from and to God. . . . What is happening in Egypt is not a 2000-year-old legend, but a modern, living testimony to the power of the Christian faith.

Please pray for the Church of the Martyrs, as they seek to faithfully apply the teachings and example of Jesus to forgive and carry on. Pray for patience in the midst of sorrow and grief. Pray for victory over bitterness and anger. Pray for our church and government leaders. And as you celebrate this weekend, may you be inspired by the witness of many Egyptian Christians whose faith epitomizes the true meaning of Easter.³⁴

Living and working amongst Muslims who deny the Cross often brings Christians to a deeper appreciation of the Cross³⁵ and therefore to a deeper worship. Here is John of Damascus, the great 7–8th century theologian whose family served as civil servants during the early Islamic rule, in his treatise *On the Veneration of the Cross*:

34 Ramez Atullah, *Bible Society of Egypt Newsletter*, 13th May 2017, <http://mailchi.mp/bsoe/not-just-a-legend-1?e=f9290d4795>, used with permission.

35 See my ‘Cross-Reference Theology: Speaking, Thinking and Living the Cross in the Context of Islam’, in D.E. Singh (ed), *Jesus and the Cross*, 150.

This is the shield and weapon against, and trophy over, the devil. This is the seal *that the destroyer may not touch you* (Exodus 12:23), as says the Scripture. This is the resurrection of those lying in death, the support of the standing, the staff of the weak, the rod of the flock, the safe conduct of the earnest, the perfection of those that press forwards, the salvation of soul and body, the aversion of all things evil, the patron of all things good, the taking away of sin, the plant of resurrection, the tree of eternal life.

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